

[W. D. Long]

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Forest Hill Inn,

Asheville, N. C.

Accountant.

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PERENNIAL CONTESTANT Original Names Changed Names

W.D. Long Bill Martin C9 - [?] C. Box 2

PERENNIAL CONTESTANT

“Stevenson said, 'Man is a creature who lives not upon bread alone, but principally by catch-words,' and, boy, let me tell you something: it's just as true today as when he said it!”

Bill Martin is very emphatic about it. Bill is the accountant for a large lumber company, but he lives, breathes, eats, sleeps, and dreams contests: soap contests, cigarette contests, soft drink contests, all contests. He is forever seeking the right word, the right combination of words, the words that will win the contest. And he is a winner, too! A cigar company has just given him an automobile for sending in some attractive “catch-words.” He is always collecting box tops, labels, wrappers, miscellaneous things which must accompany contest entries. He keeps one ear constantly cocked to the radio, for a new contest may be announced any minute.

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Bill dresses conservatively, and is quite bald on top. He is sensitive about his baldness, and never removes his hat or cap unless absolutely necessary. He wears a cap in 2 bad weather. His height is somewhat less than average, and his face is pink and round. He is stocky, but not obese, and his feet are dainty. In his nervous quickness of movement and speech, he suggests a part sparrow or a bantam rooster. He smokes cigarettes (never cigars), but carefully tears each one in twain, and places one half in a holder. The other half he will smoke later. Sometimes he takes a drink or whisky, neat. Sometimes, if he thinks he may want a drink later on, he will order one at the bar, and, when it is served, have it poured into a small flask that he usually carries for the purpose. He lives alone, and has never thought of marrying. In fact, women do not seem to interest him at all - only contests.

He is a native of this state, having been born 50 years ago in one of the Piedmont cities. He was the oldest of seven children. His brothers and sisters are all married and raising families. Their father was a cotton factor, and quite successful, and all of the children were given college educations. Bill attended one of the denominational colleges near his home, and "just happened to drift into accounting."

In 1910 he went to Mexico as a bookkeeper for a mining company. He was there about two years, but never did like it. He picked up a little Spanish, or "Mexican" as he says, but failed utterly in his efforts to make friends with the natives.

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"They didn't like Americans, and wouldn't have anything to do with them. There were Germans there, and English, and one Frenchman. The Mexicans got along all right with them, but it seemed like they hated us Americans. I don't know why. We weren't any less friendly then the others.

"I was glad to get a job back in the States, and I traveled about quite a bit for a year or so. I was with the Bauman Adding Machine Company, and there was a crew of four of

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us traveling together. We went from place to place getting new agencies organized and running smoothly. In the fall of 1913 we came here to Oakville, and I liked it so much I decided to stay. I like the climate. I wouldn't live anywhere else. I haven't always had a good job, but I'm going to stay here as long as I have something to live on.

"The flood of 1916 washed away the People's Lumber Company, where I was working, and I thought for a while I was out of luck. I hadn't saved any money to speak of, and at first it didn't look like the company was going back in business. I couldn't find a job anywhere else, and I was thinking about going back home, when they decided to reopen the People's. The flood had washed everything away, and it was just like a new business starting up, except that they had the good will of the community, of course. It took the surveyors several days to locate and stake out the company's property, because all the nearby landmarks had been destroyed."

Bill left that company after a few years, and became manager of an industrial bank. He lost his position, however, when the bank merged with another. Several temporary connections followed, until a few years ago he got his present position, which seems permanent.

"What got you started on contests, Bill?"

"I don't have the slightest idea, now. It was about 20 years ago, I believe, but I've been in so many I don't even remember what that first one was. I didn't win anything, though, I remember that. I guess that is what started me. I was disappointed at not winning, and when another contest came along, I suppose I said to myself, 'Well, let's see if you can win this one.' I didn't, though. I failed very consistently. I worked like the devil on some of them, too.

"I remember one in particular. It was sponsored by a newspaper. They had a large picture of an elephant, made up of hundreds of figures, large and small, and the idea was to determine 'the weight of the elephant' by adding up all of the figures in his picture. I think the first prize was \$5,000, but in order to qualify for it, the contestant had to send in a

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certain number of subscriptions. A smaller number would only qualify you for a smaller prize, and so on down the line. As I remember it, if you sent in only one 5 subscription, the most you could win was \$500, or perhaps it was \$100, I'm not sure. Anyhow, I naturally aimed at the top prize, and it kept me busy getting new subscribers. The picture puzzle was easy - too easy. I'll bet 1,000 people solved it. Those who did were sent a second puzzle, harder than the first, and quite a few were eliminated. The others had to work a still-harder puzzle, and it seemed like the damn thing was going on forever, getting harder each time. I lost out on the last puzzle, and didn't get a thing for several month's work. Well, I was more determined than ever to win a big contest, but I continued to lose. I got 'honorable mention' several times, but, no cash!

"I've written and sent in slogans for everything that's advertised, it seems like, and I've solved thousands of picture puzzles, and unscrambled millions of words. Now you have to give reasons for using something, and I've learned all the superlatives in the book. They start you off with something like this: 'I think Dish-blah Soap Chips are best for baby's clothes because (Finish this statement in 25 words or less.' Then you begin to toss your superlatives around until you get the 'catch-words' that appeal to the judges. They like to give away automobiles now, instead of money. I suppose the automobile manufacturers work with them because they get a lot of advertising out of it, too."

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"Tell me about the contest you won."

"Which one? I've won two!"

"Both of them, then."

"Well, the first time I ever won anything in my life was just a few weeks ago, in a contest sponsored by a building and loan association. They wanted a slogan, and I gave them a good one: 'Save to build, and build to save.' Six other people sent in the same thing, though, and we had to have a run-off contest. Each of us had to write an essay, but the

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judges thought mine was the best, so I won the \$100. Maybe you think I wasn't proud! After 20 years I turned in a winner!

“But, that's not all, by a darn sight: I had been sending in answers to a cigar company for weeks. It was one of those 'because' contests, and I gave 'em every reason in the world I could think of why anyone should smoke their cigars, or any other cigars, for that matter. You had to send in some bands from their cigars with each entry, and I scoured the town getting them. I don't smoke cigars, myself, but I got all the friends I could to smoke them and save the bands for me. I probably sent in 150 answers.

“Then one day, about a week after I won the building and loan contest, I heard that the telegraph company was trying to reach me with a message. I never thought of the contest at all, because they were announcing the winners 7 over the radio. I thought the telegram was bad news of some sort. My mother is getting pretty old, for one thing. I went straight to a speak-easy for a bracer before calling the telegraph company for the message, and it's a good thing I did - I couldn't have been more surprised by anything.

“The telegram started off, 'Congratulations on being a winner . . .' and so on. It was a long message, and I couldn't take it all in at first. I had the operator read it over again, and then it dawned on me that I had won one of the automobiles given away by the cigar company! It was the biggest shock I ever got in my life! They told me to listen in on a certain radio program that night, and of course I did, after calling and telling my friends about it. I bought drinks all around, for the first time in my life, and then the house served a free round. Later, when they announced my name on the radio, and read the answer I sent it, I got about the biggest thrill I ever had.”

“What was the winning answer?”

“Man to man, smoke Floi-ran, because it puts kick into smoking, and takes kick out of price.”

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“Very catchy. Have they given you the car yet?”

“Oh, yes. I got it the next week, and sold it the same day. I don't have any use for a car. I knocked \$100 off the regular price and sold it for cash. Didn't you see my 8 picture in the paper the next day? They had a formal presentation, with a representative of the cigar company, the automobile dealer, photographers, and everything. The paper gave me a nice write-up, too.”

“Does that end your career ad a contestant? You realized your ambition: you became a winner.”

“No, indeed! I'm not quitting now. I'm just beginning. I lost for so long, now I'm going to win for a while!”